



Pleasant Houses

By Frances O. J. Gaither

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SHAND never turned into St. Stephen Street, as now, but he sensed anew its gracious comeliness. Indefinitely various, but changeless, the black branches of live-oaks met overhead in a web of beauty that forever shut out garishness. Through the velvet shadows on either hand glowed luminous windows, abiding evidence that life yet shone in splendid serenity behind those steadfast walls.

A deep breath marked the appreciation of the girl beside him in the car. Katherine's sympathy was as exquisitely keyed as if she had never been away growing up in far places while he had clung to the street, even to the house, of his birth.

"I believe it is loveliest of all at night," she said.

Elliott Shand loved the street at morning, too, when the sunlight slanting through those amazing trees printed grotesque patterns on the pavement, an elfin carpet for the dingy, gnomelike workers to tread when they emerged heavy-eyed from Dawes and passed unseeing between the sleeping houses; loved it at Mardi Gras when the swaying, but tawdry, floats, tinsel things in jostling Commerce Street, were transmuted by the quivering green half lights of St. Stephen Street into mystic craft.

His sister met them at the door. Shand missed no detail of Fannie's toilet. She wore deep purple chiffon

veiling a slip of fanciful blue, the whole crushed under stately brocade panels in pansy tints. Her hair suggested medieval courts. She put her arm about Katherine in a perfect gesture of delicate indulgence to youth. For her brother there was the nod of complete understanding.

"See," her eyes seemed to say to him as she herself took the girl's wrap, "here I am, ready to be sweet to her—if she turns out to be the right one."

For Fannie's sake, vowed Elliott Shand, he must be very sure. He looked with some dismay at the young creature in her misty frock emerging rainbow-hued from her gray mantle—exquisite, but disconcertingly youthful. Who could tell but that her April skies might flash lightnings as startling as that streak of silver cord girdling her? In her years away from St. Stephen Street what alien element might have slipped in among the gentleness he was finding so perfect in her?

Fannie had taught him how comfortable is serenity in a woman. About him soft lights, reflected by gleaming brasses and mellow mahogany; the maid, moving noiselessly away with his guest's wrap; the subtle warmth, perfumed ever so seductively by bowls of winter roses—all whispered of the charm that Fannie could create. People said that Fannie's home was the perfect St. Stephen Street type. To Fannie's

-brother, it was St. Stephen Street, place of gentle grace and easy beauty—home. Yes, he must be very sure.

Katherine, her eyes, too, following Fannie into the drawing-room, bent with movement half wistful, half confident, to a mass of japonicas, crimson as blood, set in a shallow jade-green dish upon a gate-leg table.

"How does she do it?" she said to Elliott Shand. "Always the right thing!"

"I've often wondered." Sure of her sympathy, he added: "The best of Fannie is, one can always count on her. She never startles."

Katherine pondered that in young, serious absorption, and then, as she slipped her hand into the arm he offered, she laughed softly.

"You wouldn't advise a débutante, then, to strive for infinite variety?"

"Not if I took a deep interest in the débutante," he assured her, savoring the blush that spread over her cheek.

In the drawing-room, attention converged upon Fannie's husband. Jex's smooth round face radiated content as he stood the center of a laughing group. He accepted plaudits with the ease of habit. A sane, slow-mannered man, the very tower of conservatism, he was stirred by his latest political triumph to no emotion stronger than a pervasive satisfaction.

"Pretty close," Jex was saying mildly. "I thought for a bad hour that newer element had me beat."

Shand turned to young Doctor Paul apart, a solitary figure on the hearth-rug, arms folded, brow contracted, staring into the fire.

"Hello, Paul," said Shand, smiling. "Have you congratulated the commissioner on his reelection?"

"St. Stephen Street still runs the city," said the doctor dourly, without looking up.

"You talk as if you weren't born in

St. Stephen Street, man. Why shouldn't it run the city?"

"Of course you feel that way," retorted Paul. His thin nostrils dilated, and his chin shot up. "Any one who doesn't is a bolshevik! Any one who wants new blood in the commission or new boilers in the city light plant is a radical. Change is revolution."

"You stayed away from us too long," Shand palliated. "Sometimes I think you got a lot of things besides medicine while you were gone, Paul. Be reasonable. Even your patients over there in Dawes are a lot better off, if they did but know it, in the hands of——" He hesitated.

"Gentlemen, you were going to say?" prompted the young doctor, scraping an irritable heel against the fender.

"Well, men who believe in the things St. Stephen Street stands for."

"Its own sacred well-being! Do you pretend to think this street gives a rap what happens to Dawes? Do you——"

It was one thing to hear calmly diatribes against the boilers in the city light plant and the pulse of the city commission, and something quite different to listen to an arraignment of St. Stephen Street. Shand had to walk away to conceal his impatience. Almost at once he heard Katherine's eager laugh behind him; and, turning, he saw her at Paul's side catch up against her bare shoulder Fannie's big Maltese cat. In the ceiling-high mirror above the old marble mantel, Katherine's eyes met Shand's. Young as she was, she somehow fitted graciously into the carved gilt frame like a lovely painting by Romney. She smiled at Elliott Shand.

"Please," said the girl to Doctor Paul, "please don't talk heresy about St. Stephen Street."

The doctor growled anathema.

"But it's so comfortable," insisted Katherine.

"Damn comfort!" blurted Paul and turned on his heel.

The girl in the misty frock stared after him. She did not notice Elliott Shand again at her elbow. Startled, she almost let the cat slip from her arms. Sheba clutched at the shoulder bare but for a gossamer band of cerulean gauze.

"Oh, Sheba," said Katherine, stooping to set the cat on the rug, "who would suspect you of claws?"

A little scarlet thread showed itself in her blue shoulder-strap.

At Shand's table they were just beginning the third rubber. There fell one of those complete silences possible when the game is auction bridge.

Then cataclysm shook St. Stephen Street, concussion, thunder, darkness. The brick walls quaked. Slats of the blinds fluttered as in a tornado. Detonation shivered into a blast, mighty, sibilant, like the quenching of hell.

Katherine's hand found its way to Shand's arm.

"Is it a storm?" she whispered. "How it blows!"

"Explosion," some one found voice.

"It's the power house," said the doctor, his voice leaping like a flame in the darkness. "Defective boilers."

"My God!" the commissioner exclaimed, recalling who knows what campaign speeches.

On roared the blast, titanic, inexorable.

"Don't be alarmed," Shand reassured the girl. "It is blocks away." His voice fell into the ocean of sound like little shells that children cast from cliffs.

At the other table, Fannie rose. They heard her move toward the door.

"I will have candles brought," she said.

"Do," said Jex. "I doubled those spades."

The doctor spoke again.

"You must excuse me."

"Certainly, Paul," Jex agreed. "You are dummy."

Fannie paused. Their eyes reacting

to the firelight, they could all dimly see her standing there against the white door. Doctor Paul, shadowy, erect, moved toward her.

"Paul," she said, "you aren't afraid some one has been—hurt?"

His voice caressed their ears, aching under the relentless torrent.

"Don't you hear?" he said gently. "Lives were blown out in that like candles in a wind."

Fannie opened the door and let him pass. They heard his car plunge off. A chair pushed back. In another moment they were all outside on the tiled porch.

The rush of steam swelled louder. An opening in the arching branches framed strange gray billows rolling in a gray sky. What lay below, that the hideous genii, irrevocably loosed, should hover so long exultant?

"See how still St. Stephen Street is!" Katherine shivered a little as she let Shand fold her in a coat he had caught up in the dark hall.

"God knows what caused it, Jex!" said a voice. Some one was standing with the commissioner on the steps, his hand on the topmost iron railing. Whimsical dragons in the balustrade writhed strangely in the light from the candles Fannie's maid was placing in the hall. The man's face showed twisted, too, in the uncertain, fluttering glow. "Whole block blown to bits! We've got to keep the crowds back."

Jex laid his hand on Fannie's shoulder a moment and went.

"Go back to your game," he said. "I'll call you up in half an hour."

"I could never settle to cards," Katherine confided in Elliott Shand with a restless movement of her shoulders. "Fix it so they'll play and you take me over yonder in your car."

St. Stephen Street, as they drew down it, was sweetly alight with stary candles set in its windows. Voices sounded equably from porches where

people lingered in the mild night. Shand's hearing was accustoming itself to the noise of escaping steam as to the boom of distant surf outside a tranquil harbor.

"If it had to be," said Katherine, "aren't you glad it wasn't St. Stephen Street?"

"Ah," Elliott Shand thought aloud, "these homes never could be rebuilt."

Light beat in their faces at the turning into Commerce Street. Noises buffeted them. Here blazed countless lamps on automobiles all rolling one way. A great hotel glowed from street to sky under power of its own dynamos. Close by, a lighted street-car slowed to a crawl. An ambulance clanged for right of way. Waves of dissonance tossed up broken bits of talk:

"Still getting them out——"
"Twenty dead——" "Bolsheviki? No, damn rotten boilers!"

Caught in the stream, they were sucked nearer to the dark vortex beneath those raging billows yet mounting to heaven.

"There!" exclaimed Katherine, pointing to a momentary gap in the pushing crowds. A policeman was lowering a rope for the insistent ambulance. "We can get through."

The pit of ruin yawned before them. Scalded by its own steam, the dim inferno reared black, shapeless hummocks in incandescent depths. Through evil webs of twisted machinery writhed dark shapes. Voices struggled out, shouts of command, cries of torture.

"I must take you away," Shand said.

A moan broke from Katherine. She covered her eyes with her hands. Just ahead four men were slipping a stretcher into a waiting ambulance. Out of a lighted doorway across from the shattered block emerged upon the sidewalk other men with a second stretcher. There were no seemly

white bandages to conceal the scarlet horror it carried.

"Please," said the girl. "Back to St. Stephen Street!"

Shand would have turned his car, but a voice ordered him to stay where he was. It was Doctor Paul following the stretcher out of the doorway.

"Don't hold up this ambulance," he shouted. And then to the ambulance driver: "Bring me a nurse, for God's sake!"

The ambulance turned. Elliott Shand swung his own machine into line. His foot found the accelerator. But the girl flung wide the door on her side and sprang from the moving automobile. The wheels spinning through the sluice sprayed her delicate frock and cloudy mantle with sooty water. Her silver slippers plunged quite beneath the grimy flood. The bright cord of her girdle hung on the door-catch, torn from her dress with the force of her spring, and trailed along through the water as Shand drove on alone.

"I've had first aid," she said to Doctor Paul.

Shand, going back to St. Stephen Street, met Fannie's party on its way to the Bourbon Club to serve coffee to the exhausted firemen. He became their convoy. Parking his car at last, he made his way on foot back toward the ruin. It was hard going. Almost imperceptibly, at first, and then positively he felt the tide turning against him. Men were fighting their way out.

Fire! A floating whisper struck his ear. He scarcely knew whether he heard or simply feared the thing. A mounted policeman towered over the heads. The ranks of the crowd wavered. Behind the shadowy bulk of the horseman floated up a pennon of smoke. The pennon became a rolling black cloud shot through with leaping ghosts of flame. A warm gust swept in from the river, and the stream of smoke sparkled with flashing stars.

"In this wind," said a man to Elliott Shand, and shook his head.

Shand nodded. He was surprised to see how light everything was growing. He could see the sandy-mustache of the man who spoke, sandy mustache and worried eyes.

"I hope it don't get over into Dawes," the man went on in naïve self-thought. "Sick wife."

Shand pictured crowded wooden houses.

"Oh," he encouraged, "Dawes is a long way off. What is it that's caught? Do you know?"

"Laundry. They were using it for a hospital."

Good God! Katherine was in there. Remorseless tides beat against him. Crushing bodies bound his arms. White faces, terror-written, ringed him in. Sometimes he was hurtled back; sometimes he held his ground; sometimes he fought forward through amazing inches, agony-bought. Once a great form set itself to halt him. Shand felt iron ribs pressing his. The acrid odor of sweat filled his nostrils. He strained against his enemy, hating the gross, bearded cheek, the panic-stricken eyes. Sheer strain availed him nothing. He set his feet upon the giant's toes, crushing them until the bearded mouth opened, bleating.

Forward. He got one arm free. There was a mad moment when bodies and faces struggled to efface themselves before him, fought each other to yield him a path. Then he saw an open space and livid flame. A white-swan sign, swinging in the streams from firemen's hose, marked the laundry door. Smoke rolled forth. Stumbling, Elliott Shand ran toward that door.

At the very threshold he met Paul staggering out with Katherine in his arms. Her feet dangled. The silver slippers were sodden.

"Fainted," said Paul, going toward an ambulance. "Some burns about the

arms." The girl stirred, murmuring Paul's name. He bent his head. "Very uncomfortable?" he asked her.

She opened her eyes and flashed up at him the smile of a bad child.

"Damn comfort," she said.

She did not even see Elliott Shand holding open the door of the ambulance.

It seemed a long time after that when Shand heard the doom of St. Stephen Street, a strange chasm of time in which events poised dreamlike, stripped of meaning, extent, succession. Through clouds of smoke flame-lit visions moved: oranges upset before a tiny fruit-stand, a gesticulating maniac cursing in Greek; himself climbing, choked with fumes; a child caught up in blankets and borne down stairs that seemed to have no end; a woman on the pavement shrilling reproaches because he crashed into a heap of ugly glass things rimmed with brassy gilt; men shouting him on to work faster and faster; wagons towering with silly pieces of things, a wooden sham bolster, half of a cheap davenport—Mad visions of frenzied effort to cheat the insatiate of any morsel!

Shand thought of Fannie at the Bourbon Club, of a cup of coffee.

Jex sat in a high-backed chair beside a carved oak table littered by loaves of bread and scattered china. Fannie stood at his elbow, and the fire chief, in front.

"Not unless you say the word," the man in helmet and slicker was saying when Elliott Shand came up to them.

The group at the table formed a little pool of tranquillity in the eddying room. All about it women came and went with swift steps. At a telephone table in the corner, a capable voice commandeered lodgings for the homeless. No one heeded Jex sitting with his face in his hands and the fire chief waiting before him.

"It's St. Stephen Street for Dawes, is it, Joe?" Jex asked in a muffled tone.

"If the wind would lay," said the chief, irresolute.

Fannie laid her hand on Jex's shoulder.

"But of course we can't wait to see," she said.

Shand drained his cup. Across its rim his eyes met Fannie's unflinching gaze. Jex lifted his head.

"Go ahead, Joe," he said. "Blow her up."

Elliott Shand rode with the chief's deputy in the scarlet automobile carrying dynamite into St. Stephen Street. And so his last vision of the street was a strange and lurid dream. As they tore screaming up its length of quiet houses, steadfast under ancient trees, he fancied the trumpet shivered its raucous blast against those walls which so serenely stood, their shadowy bulk pricked by gentle candles in the windows.

"They shall break down thy walls and destroy thy pleasant houses." He wondered where he'd heard that prophecy.

"Save something," the deputy adjured him, "while we're getting people out."

But Elliott Shand moved with no haste as he crossed the pavement to his home. He even paused a moment, resting his hand on the cool iron of the gate. The late moon, just coming up over the house next door, whitened into beauty the old sundial set among the shadows that were Fannie's azaleas. Far and wide Fannie had searched for that sundial. "It must be an old one and very lovely," she had said, "if the azaleas are to welcome it."

In the hallway by the mahogany gate-leg table, he paused again after he had lighted the candle. The radiant japonicas in the jade-green dish held his eyes. He touched the glowing petals.

"Always the right thing," he said aloud.

He lifted the candle above his head and looked all about him.

Through the drawing-room door, he

saw that the fire in the grate had crumbled. Carved, gilt molding about the ceiling-high mirror framed depths wherein hung a candle and the shadow of a man. On the marble mantel a clock chimed the half hour. The man with the candle moved nearer. Eleven-thirty! He should have thought the night was nearly spent. How prettily had the girl nodded to him in this mirror as she had stood laughing before the surly young doctor. The water was very deep. She could have been set upon the dry sidewalk—or perhaps he could have stayed her altogether. But, no, it was adventure going out to adventure, the high heart to the high heart, youth to youth. He had to let her go, had to drive on alone, the broken silver cord trailing.

"I must save something," he reminded himself, and climbed the stairs.

In his own room, he saw the dressing-case Fannie had given him. He opened it on his bureau and began to put the gold-mounted pieces in, one at a time. His face in the glass before him arrested his hands. Another mirror. He studied it.

He was forty years old. He had never known another home. First, his mother, then Fannie. There had been women, two or three, but when he had brought them here to St. Stephen Street they had seemed alien. Only this girl was—

After the dressing-case, there were Fannie's jewels, nothing of great value, just things he and Jex had given her from time to time. She would want them. Then there was a treasure-box of Jex's, and then there was the Shand silver to be got from the dining room. Two suit cases he had filled when he stood again by the table of the japonicas. Something brushed against him.

"Oh—Sheba," he said.

He considered the suit cases. He was not trying to make a decision, only to remember the contents of each. He

had put his dressing-case and the jewelry into the black one. It was the other that held the Shand silver. That was the one he should keep. He set the black one down.

"Come, Sheba."

He put the cat on his shoulder.

But, after all, she would not be rescued. At the gate, she wrenched herself free and darted back. Pausing, he saw her leap through the doorway ahead of the two firemen who passed him on their way in.

He had stayed longer than he meant. The high wind was freighted with the smell of burning. Clutching his heavy suit case, he started. He was almost knocked down by a man running.

"Excuse me, sir," spoke a voice reminiscent of sandy mustache and wor-

ried eyes, "but do you know where I can get a car? Got to get my wife out! Heart, you know. When these brick houses start falling——"

"Couldn't we carry her, you think?" asked Elliott Shand. "Perhaps a cot or——"

"But you're loaded now."

Beyond the iron fence Fannie's sundial shone moon-white among its black shrubs. From Dawes, two blocks away, sounded panic, vibrant with hoarse, uncertain cries, running feet, nameless crashes. The tumult called like the compelling voice of the sea outside some glassy harbor.

Elliott Shand set his bag on the ground.

"This?" he said. "This is of no consequence."

